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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: DEPUTY FM DISCUSSES MIDDLE EAST ISSUES

REF: (A) VATICAN 1, (B) VATICAN 5 AND PREVIOUS, (C) 07 VATICAN 180

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a recent meeting with a visiting White House official, Holy See Deputy FM Parolin called for dialogue to resolve the Lebanese political impasse and address concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions. Parolin confirmed that negotiations with Israel on taxation of Church property in the Holy Land and other issues have stalled. He welcomed new openings for inter-religious dialogue, but was critical of the "Alliance of Civilizations" initiative. On the upcoming visit of the Pope to the US, Parolin said the trip is mainly intended to help the Church in the US regain hope and confidence. End summary.

¶2. (U) Joseph Wood, Deputy Assistant on National Affairs to the Vice President, met January 14 with Monsignor Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Undersecretary for Relations with States (deputy foreign affairs minister) to discuss Lebanon, Iran, the Arab-Israeli peace process, relations between the Holy See and Israel, and inter-religious dialogue. Wood subsequently met Monsignor Franco Coppola, the Vatican's point man on Middle East issues. Poloff attended both meetings.

¶3. (C) Parolin thought the political crisis in Lebanon was worsening and restated the Holy See's concern for Christians in that country. The Vatican, he said, will continue to do what it can to help resolve a very complicated situation. Identifying General Suleiman as a candidate was a step forward because he is strong enough to preserve the powers of the presidency and the rights of minorities. However, Parolin added, Syrian views must be taken into account or there will be no lasting agreement. Parolin seemed skeptical that electing a president by a simple majority would be a viable, peaceful alternative to the current impasse.

¶4. (C) Parolin advocated addressing Iran's nuclear program concerns peacefully, saying that the use of force would be catastrophic. For Parolin, the Iranian leadership is not monolithic. Parliamentary elections in March, he added, could erode President Ahmadinejad's authority. Coppola later expanded on this view, observing that Ahmadinejad's political allies benefit by presenting him as the protector of Iran's sovereignty in the face of outside pressure; if they are unable to exploit confrontation with the US, the electorate would instead be more focused on Ahmadinejad's poor domestic record and the economy.

¶5. (C) Parolin hoped the Arab-Israeli peace process would go forward following the positive momentum reached at Annapolis and President Bush's visit to the region. Parolin considers settlements the main obstacle, and wondered if Israel was ready to stop building them. Another challenge is to convince public opinion on both sides of the conflict that peace is indeed possible.

16. (C) Moving on to the Holy See's relations with Israel and the ongoing negotiations to conclude complementary agreements to the 1993 Fundamental Agreement that established bilateral diplomatic relations, Parolin confirmed that the talks have stalled (reftel A) and thought that Israel would not change its position on local taxation of Church property. He noted that some religious orders operate guest houses in the Holy Land, which he thought could be legitimately taxed. Israel is also concerned about having to extend to other denominations the same level of exemptions that the Church claims, despite the fact that these are Church rights that precede the creation of the state of Israel and have been recognized in UN resolutions. Parolin said that thus far the Holy See has merely kept the local Church (in the Holy Land) informed about the negotiations, but it may be time for the local Church itself to be more directly involved.

17. (C) Parolin confirmed the Holy See's desire to advance the inter-religious dialogue spurred by the exchanges of letters between Islamic scholars working with the Jordanian Aal-al-Bayt Institute, and the Holy See (reftel B). He noted that it would be the Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue that would lead and manage the talks for the Vatican (septel). The Secretariat of State may be consulted on the foreign relations

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aspects of the dialogue -- which he thought were not substantial at this stage -- but will not engage in a parallel diplomatic track. Parolin was pleased by the broad scope of Muslim scholars engaged in the process. He recalled, however, that the King of Saudi Arabia had told the Pope that the signatories did not represent the views of all Muslims (reftel C).

18. (C) Parolin also commented briefly on the "Alliance of Civilizations" inter-cultural meeting held in Madrid January 15 and 16. Without elaborating, he confided that the Holy See was "not very happy with this initiative" because "it is too political". With respect to the April 2008 visit of the Pope to the US, Parolin said that its main purpose is to give the U.S.

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Catholic Church renewed confidence after the scandals of the past few years. Parolin hoped that the visit will lead to a new willingness on the part of the American Church to be visibly present in society.

19. (C) Comment: Parolin confirmed the Holy See's preference, on principle, to engage in dialogue, no matter how difficult the interlocutor. He is much gentler in his comments about US policies toward Iran and Syria than is his subordinate, Coppola, who clearly considers those policies counterproductive. This is likely because Parolin's senior position gives him a broader perspective -- not because of any disagreement with Coppola. Parolin was remarkably pragmatic in musing about the possibility of pulling in the local Church in the Holy Land to deal with the Israelis more directly. This could be an indication that the Holy See does not want negotiations to stall indefinitely because of fiscal matters, at the expense of achieving more normal -- less acrimonious -- relations with Israel. End comment.
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